The Battle of Marathon: Constructing and Understanding Persian Defeat

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Abstract

What happened to the Persian cavalry at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Herodotus presents them to us in *Histories*, but subsequently neglects to give them a role in the actual battle. However, whether or not the cavalry was there, the Persian army was at an advantage in many other respects. They made use of combined-arms warfare, which included infantry units with bows and arrows, small daggers, and short spears.[1] The Greeks, on the other hand, relied on a single type of weapon, the long spear, wielded by hoplite warriors—foot soldiers who fought in tight phalanx formation. But the greatest advantage that the Persian army had over the Greeks was their size. They outnumbered their enemy by at least two to one.[2] The question then becomes how and why, in light of the seeming advantage the Persians had over the Greeks, could they have lost the battle against the hoplites.

Keywords: Darius I, Ionian Revolt, Marathon, Herodotus, cavalry charge, hoplite charge, Miltiades, Callimachus

La Batalla de Maratón: Construcción y comprensión de la Derrota Persa

Resumen

Lo que le sucedió a la caballería persa en la batalla de Maratón en el 490 a. C. es objeto de un debate académico en curso. Heródoto nos los presenta en Historias, pero posteriormente se niega a darles un papel en la batalla real. Sin embargo, ya sea que la caballería estuviera allí o no, el ejército persa estaba en ventaja en muchos otros aspectos. Hicieron uso de la guerra de armas combinadas, que incluía unidades de infantería con arcos y flechas, dagas pequeñas y lanzas cortas. Los griegos, por otro lado, confiaban en un solo tipo de arma, la lanza larga, empuñada por guerreros hoplitas, soldados de a pie que luchaban en formación de falange apretada. Pero la mayor ventaja que tenía el ejército persa sobre los griegos

era su tamaño. Superaban en número a su enemigo por al menos dos a uno. La pregunta entonces es cómo y por qué, a la luz de la aparente ventaja que los persas tenían sobre los griegos, pudieron haber perdido la batalla contra los hoplitas.

Palabras clave: Darío I, revuelta jónica, Maratón, Heródoto, carga de caballería, carga de hoplitas, Milcíades, Calímaco

马拉松战役：关于波斯战败的建构与理解

摘要

公元前490年马拉松战役中波斯骑兵的遭遇一直是学术辩论的主题。希罗多德在其著作《历史》中介绍了这一切，但随后却没有介绍骑兵在实际战斗中的作用。不过，无论有没有骑兵，波斯军队在许多其他方面都处于优势。他们使用联合兵种作战，其中包括配备弓箭、小匕首和短矛的步兵部队。另一方面，希腊人依靠单一类型的武器——长矛，由装甲步兵战士使用，步兵以紧密的方阵队形作战。不过，与希腊军队相比，波斯军队的最大优势是其规模。他们的人数至少以二比一的比例超过了敌人。那么问题在于，鉴于波斯人与希腊人相比所具有的表面优势，其如何以及为何会输掉与装甲步兵的战斗。

关键词：大流士一世，爱奥尼亚起义，马拉松战役，希罗多德，骑兵冲锋，装甲步兵冲锋，米太亚德，卡利马科斯

In the sixth century BC, the wars between Greece and Persia began when Persian King Darius I (*r.* 522–486 BC) sought to control the increasingly insubordinate city-states of Ionia, a Greek region located on the western coast of Anatolia, which corresponds to present-day Turkey. In 499 BC Ionia, which had been subject to Persian control since Cyrus the Great (*r.* 559–530 BC) had conquered it in 547 BC, began to revolt against Persian domination. The rebellion provided Darius with an ulterior motive to go to war with the rest of Greece: to punish the city-states of Athens and Eretria for supporting the Ionians during their failed revolt against Persian rule.[3] The success of his mission in Ionia empowered Darius's westward momentum. In his play, *The Persians*, produced in the spring of 472 BC, playwright Aeschylus echoed Darius's vainglorious convictions, figuratively quoting him as saying: "For by the will of the gods Fate has held sway since ancient time, and has ordained for

Figure 1: Detail of Darius I from the bas-relief titled the Behistun Inscription—a trilingual cuneiform Achaemenid royal message inscribed in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian on a cliffside at Mount Behistun in the Kermanshah Province of Iran (522–486 BC). The relief commemorates Darius' victory over nineteen battles which took place over the course of one year ending in December 521 BC—before their devastating loss at Marathon. Licensed under the Creative Commons.

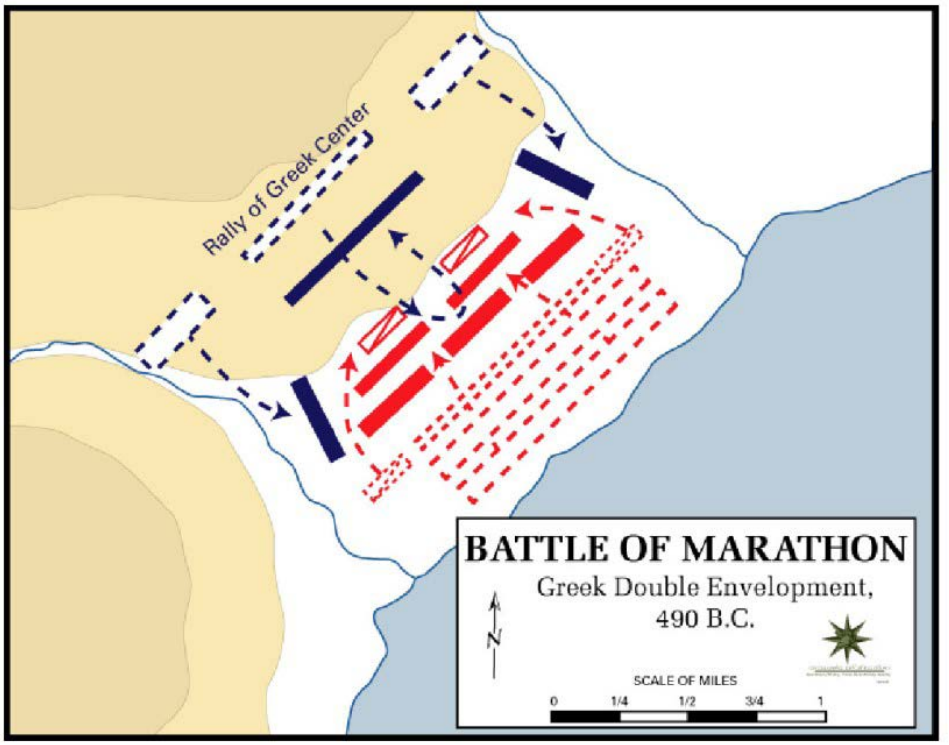
the Persians the pursuit of rampart-destroying war, the turmoil of fighting horsemen, and the storming of cities."[4]

The Ionian Revolt (499–493 BC) represented the first major struggle between Greece and the Persian Empire and ushered in the first phase of the Greco-Persian Wars (499–449 BC). In 492 BC Persian military commander Mardonius (*d.* 479 BC) re-subjugated an equally rebellious Thrace—a geographical region corresponding to modern-day Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey—which had been a province of the Persian empire since 513 BC. In 490 BC, under the command of Median noble, admiral Datis I and Darius's nephew, general Artaphernes, the city of Eretria surrendered with little resistance.[5] Darius then set his sights on Marathon to confront the Athenians in the first major invasion of Greece. Once again Darius enlisted the help of Datis. Alarmed by the rising threat, the Athenian democratic assembly quickly dispatched forces to Marathon and sent a runner by the name of Philippides to Sparta to enlist their help.[6] But the Spartans could not immediately join the Athenians on account of a religious festival that obliged them to wait for the full moon. Fortunately, roughly one-thousand allies from Plataea joined the Athenians and on September 10, 490 BC the battle at Marathon ensued.

In *Histories*, Herodotus (484–425 BC), the only Greek historian to whom we owe much for our knowledge of this battle, states, "[w]hen they had been set in order and the sacrifices were favorable, the Athenians were sent forth and charged the foreigners at a run."[7] Aside from this information, Herodotus's narrative is woefully lacking details; it particularly lacks mention of the Persian cavalry's involvement in the battle. Because of this, research regarding this conflict is full of pitfalls that have led to investigative leaps throughout history. In a tenth-century encyclopedic lexicon known as *The Suda*, an unidentified Byzantine scholar advanced the notion that if Herodotus did not mention the involvement of the Persian cavalry at Marathon, it was because the cavalry was not there; it states that the Ionians—whom the Persians had forced into military service—"climbed trees and signalled to the Athenians that the cavalry were away," thus giving the Greeks a chance to mobilize.[8] On the flipside, Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos (c. 110 BC–c. 25 BC) implied that the cavalry *was* present at Marathon. In the *Lives of Cornelius Nepos: Miltiades, Themistocles, Pausanias*, he states, "arborum tractu equitatus hostium impediretur." That is: to thwart the Persian cavalry's advance, Miltiades made sure that the battle would take place near a tract of trees. Whether or not these are credible assessments of the events, is irrelevant. Certainly, scholars need to keep in mind that they were written long after the Battle of Marathon took place and their credibility can, thus, be called into question. They are, however, among the earliest writers who tried to fill the gap that Herodotus's silence created regarding the whereabouts of the Persian cavalry. Over the millennia, many scholars have aligned their own interpretations in accordance with either *The Suda* or Cornelius Nepos.

Figure 2 above: Plain of Marathon as it looks today with pine forest and wetlands. Photograph taken on May 7, 2015. Licensed under the Creative Commons.

Figure 3 below: The Battle of Marathon, an example of the Greek double-envelopment, a form of flanking maneuver. Map Courtesy of the Department of History, United States Military Academy. Licensed under the GNU Free Documentation.



Apart from sizeable units with short spears and small daggers the Persians also had a highly proficient contingent of infantry archers. Nevertheless, the cavalry was the decisive arm of their military. They were experienced archers and javelin throwers responsible for initial shock tactics.[9] On the Greek side, the long, pointed spears wielded by closely packed lines of hoplite warriors created a highly defensive, almost impenetrable hedgehog shell called the phalanx. The Greeks also had small-armed units, but their task remained ancillary—mostly off the battlefield to plunder enemy territory. Their horses, being a much smaller breed than their Persian counterparts, were limited to reconnaissance, patrolling, or guard duty.[10] But at Marathon, the greatest advantage that the Persian army had over the Greeks was their size. They outmanned their enemy by at least two to one, totaling roughly 20,000 in infantry and cavalry. For the Greek army, the Plataeans increased the total number of the hoplite forces to roughly 10,000.[11] Yet in the end, the Persians lost. The question then becomes how and why—cavalry or no cavalry—and in light of other advantages that the Persians had over the Greeks, could they have lost the battle against the hoplites.

It is important to note that there are no Persian accounts of the Battle of Marathon, so our understanding of this encounter is necessarily biased. Furthermore, while Herodotus's narrative offers the only comprehensive account of this battle, he was not a contemporary, having been born six years after it took place. And since he is the first known Western historian, there are no earlier accounts to challenge his methodology. A number of ancient sources who came after Herodotus penned their opinion of *Histories*, often criticizing what they considered Herodotus's misrepresentations. One of these is Plutarch, who in *De Herodoti malignitate* scathingly states, "it seems to me very convenient to delineate, as it were, in a rough draught, those signs and marks that distinguish a malicious narration from a candid and unbiassed one."[12] Bearing all this in mind, it will be necessary to proceed carefully in our analysis and interpretation of the circumstances surrounding the Battle of Marathon.

Herodotus mentions former Athenian tyrant Hippias (*r.* 527–510 BC), whom the Athenians had overthrown in 510 BC when they reinstated democratic rule after Hippias' father, the tyrant Pisistratus (c. 600–527 BC), had toppled it in 567 BC. After his removal, Hippias, who by this time was a very old man, turned traitor and, according to Herodotus, was guiding the Persian troops from Eretria (which the Persians had just captured) to Marathon to face the Athenians.[13] Perhaps the Persians had promised to have him reinstated as tyrant of Athens—although the consequence of such reinstatement would have likely made him a puppet of the Persian empire.[14] Hippias urged debarkation on the coast of Marathon where his father had landed almost 60 years earlier when he overthrew Athenian democracy (See Figure 2). He did so because he knew the topography there was level and thus, suitable for horses,

which could—he believed—help quash Greek strength.[15] Cavalries and phalanxes required level fields to fight effectively.

Historian Owen Rees states that when the Persians were preparing for battle, they led their horses down a narrow road which took them out of sight.[16] The intent was for the cavalry to meet the infantry already lined up on the battlefield, but according to Rees they never made it there. He states that "[t]he Persian lines were all but complete, but the horses were still nowhere to be seen."[17] This suggests that he supports *The Suda's* claim that the cavalry had disappeared although he does not explain where they might have gone. He maintains that the Persian army at Marathon was not even meant to be an invading force. Rather, since up until then the Persians had been successful in attacking and subjugating city-states with little opposition—their army at Marathon was likely meant to be a confident show of power to intimidate the Athenians.[18] This opinion not only relies on the fact that Herodotus does not mention the cavalry's involvement in the battle, it also trusts the notion that the remaining warriors, being still much more numerous than the Greek army, were nonetheless visually imposing. Advancing such a theory, however, seems to be an overstatement. That Herodotus mentions Marathon as a flat plain "most suitable for riding horses" indicates that the Persian army was present in its entirety—cavalry included.[19] More importantly, a combined-arms military like that of the Persians meant that each military component had a specific role, and the Persian cavalry was an integral part of their tactical plans. Although Herodotus does not directly mention the role of the Persian cavalry in the battle, he *does* insinuate their presence at Marathon. In *Histories* 6.112.2, he states the Persians were shocked that the Greeks "ran up so fast without either cavalry or archers."[20] This indicates a certain confidence in the Persian army that *their* cavalry was in attendance. However, the one detail missing from *Histories* that could reinforce *The Suda's* claim, was a stampede. Herodotus does not mention a cavalry charge. This is especially frustrating since both the Persian cavalry and their infantry had very well-defined tactical roles. Breaking the enemy line by a cavalry stampede was the most effective Persian strategy for victory. Each Persian infantry archer and horse-mounted warrior carried a quiver full of dozens of arrows; confusing the enemy by firing these missiles without the help of a cavalry charge to disrupt their adversary's line of defense could prove disastrous for the Persian small-arms infantry—whose mission was to then step in with small daggers and short spears for fierce hand-to-hand combat.[21]

A reasonable analytical hypothesis at this point becomes necessary since Herodotus is also silent on battle specifics. Presumably, the Persian cavalry *did* slip out of sight, but since *Histories* 6.112.2 alludes to their presence on the battlefield, their disappearance could have only been temporary. As Rees reasonably suggested, after preparing the horses the Persians led them down a narrow road toward the field

where their infantry had already taken position.[22] His interpretation supports *The Suda's* claim that the Ionians climbed trees to alert the Athenians that "the cavalry were away."[23] The disappearance of the cavalry (temporary though it may have been) would have removed the strategic disadvantage the Greeks had against their much larger adversary. More significantly, it would explain the internal squabbling that arose among the Athenian *strategos* (generals)—which threatened their solidarity. Half of them decided that it was the right moment for the Greeks to strike and that any delay could prove disastrous.[24] Such urgency implies that they expected the cavalry to arrive at a certain point. But to breach the Persian small arms infantry—presumably already lined up on the battlefield—the hoplites needed to make it there before the cavalry arrived to foil their chances. Other Greek *strategos* instead preferred waiting for the arrival and assistance of the Spartans. Perhaps they feared that the Persian cavalry could annihilate them if they arrived before the hoplites did. Miltiades (550–489 BC), one of the top ten *strategos* selected to serve at Marathon, was one of those concerned that further delay would put the fate of the city-state at risk. Clearly, to Miltiades chancing a head-on encounter with the cavalry was worth it if it meant saving Athens. He urged *polemarch* (military commander) Callimachus (*d*. 490 BC) to vote in favor of a prompt strike saying, "if you vote with me, your country will be free."[25]

Since it is highly unlikely that the Persians would have risked engaging in battle without making sure that their most important unit was going to be there, it is reasonable to assume that the cavalry arrived after the Greeks had already begun making their way across the field. Herodotus makes it clear that the intent of the hoplite charge was to bum-rush the Persians. The initial tactical move of the cavalry would have been to confuse the enemy by launching a barrage of arrows and javelins along with the help of the Persian infantry archers. Yet all Herodotus says is that the Persian army "prepared to receive them."[26] Unlike many scholars, historian Robert Drews submits that the cavalry *was* there, but kept their distance. Although the Persian army had a large contingent of missile troops (infantry as well as cavalry) they must have noticed, at a certain point, that the long spears wielded by charging hoplite warriors would frighten the horses and render them unserviceable.[27] Presumably, after fulfilling their initial strategic role of discharging arrows and javelins, they withdrew. In his book, *The Defence of Greece: 490–479 BC*, historian John Lazenby states "[t]he speed of the Greek advance would have precluded its usual hit-and-run tactics, which required a static target to be effective."[28] As such, although the cavalry had made it to the battlefield and fulfilled its preliminary tactical responsibility, it could not subsequently take part in a charge and thus, retreated. This jeopardized the close combat mission of the Persian small dagger and short spear warriors. The strength of the Persian army were the archers—both infantry and cavalry—but archers cannot fight

Figure 4 above: Marshlands of Marathon located behind the Persian battle line where many Persian soldiers drowned during the Battle of Marathon. Photograph taken on June 10, 2016. Licensed under the Creative Commons.

Figure 5 below: Strategos Cynaegirus (d. 490 BC) grabbing a Persian ship at the Battle of Marathon (19th century illustration). Source of illustration: Edward Sylvester Ellis, *The Story of the Greatest Nations, from the Dawn of History to the Twentieth Century : A Comprehensive History, Founded upon the Leading Authorities, Including a Complete Chronology of the World, and a Pronouncing Vocabulary of Each Nation* (New York: F.R. Niglutsch, 1900). Licensing: this work is in the public domain.

in close hand-to-hand combat. Perhaps, after the cavalry retreated, the infantry archers—having run out of arrows—switched to small daggers and short spears and joined the rest of the warriors. However, without arrows or cavalry, there was no one to disrupt the enemy line if it regrouped. This was a crucial strategic step, but without them the Persian army left their small-arms infantry unprotected to fight against the heavily armed hoplites.[29]

Although the absence of the cavalry made Greek victory conceivable, they knew they still needed a skillful military strategy to beat the Persians. After Callimachus had given his tie-breaking vote to proceed, they turned leadership over to Miltiades.[30] Presumably it was Miltiades' brilliant tactical plan that made the Greeks truly successful. He had left their center weak—only a few ranks deep—and used the extra men to strengthen both wings.[31] The Persians, on the other hand, placed their most elite fighters at the center of *their* line.[32] This would have ostensibly left rookies to fill their wings.[33]

The distance between the Greek and Persian armies, according to Herodotus, was about "eight stadia," which is just under a mile.[34] Herodotus mentions that once the Greeks gave the signal, they began to charge, but most scholars, including historian Peter Krentz, justifiably agree that such heavily-armed warriors could not sustain a fast run for that distance.[35] More than likely they began with a march, then proceeded to run. At a certain point, the hoplite run turned to a charge and did not slow down. The Persians, on witnessing this, initially thought the hoplites were "absolutely crazy" since they did not have a cavalry or archers to support them.[36] But any expectation they may have had for the hoplites to slow down before engaging them in battle soon faded and so did their confidence. The hoplites' fast-approaching, steady momentum would have certainly alerted the Persians of the dangerous predicament they found themselves in. They knew they would not be able to use their horses for shock tactics against a giant, fast-moving wall of pointed spears. If the cavalrymen had any arrows or javelins left, they would have contributed to the battle by continuing to discharge them until they ran out and then probably departed toward the harbor to wait for transport.[37]

At this juncture, Herodotus skips to the climax of the encounter in a matter of a few verses with scarcely a detail. He states, "when the Athenians all together fell upon the foreigners they fought in a way worthy of record."[38] Their army's exceptional protective gear, which included metal breastplates, metal helmets, and large, heavy wooden shields, would have given the Greeks the courage to forge ahead even with the reappearance of the Persian cavalry.

By comparison, the Persian infantry did not wear metal armor. They wore eccentric, colorful outfits made of fabric, which included trousers and soft felt caps. They also carried large wicker shields. The Persian cavalry likely wore metal helmets and protected their torsos with metal scaled tunics, but the

short spears, small daggers, and javelins of the Persian army were no match for the long spears brandished by the Greeks, which were six and a half to ten feet in length, and which could exact deadly injury while still keeping the enemy warrior at a safe distance.[39]

No matter how scant the information is, what *Histories* does clearly substantiate is that strengthening Greek hoplite flanks was an exceptional strategic move on the part of Greeks. The only area where the Persians had been successful was at the thin center of the Greek hoplite line, which they had easily pierced through. But arranged according to Miltiades' plan, the hoplites then brought their fortified "wings together to fight those who had broken through the center" (See Figure 3).[40] With their backs to the Bay of Marathon, the Persians were driven down toward the beach. The Greeks succeeded and gave chase to the Persians, many of whom fled to their ships. Behind the Persian battle line was marshland where many of their men drowned (See Figure 4).[41] Thus defeated, the Greeks "overpowered seven ships" belonging to the Persians (See Figure 5).[42] All totaled, according to Herodotus, the Persians lost roughly 6,400 men at Marathon, while the Greeks lost 192.[43]

Historian Harry C. Avery states that since Herodotus does not mention the cavalry's involvement in the battle, knowledge of their whereabouts is "irretrievably lost to us."[44] His research has led him (like other historians) to believe that the Persian cavalry was not at Marathon.[45] However, regardless of the insufficiency of Herodotus's narrative the *Histories* do offer evidence—circuitous though it may be—to substantiate the presence of the cavalry. Only an army in full attendance would watch a charging wall of spears running toward them and feel sufficiently confident in their belief that the Greeks had lost their minds.[46] But since *Histories* lack *direct* evidence, research must also rely on historical knowledge of Persian battle tactics to understand that they would never have left themselves so vulnerable as to not ensure that their most important unit was going to be in attendance to support their initial hit-and-run tactics.

Complications arose at Marathon because it was the first time the Persians witnessed a tightly-packed, massed formation storm an enemy. Basic rectangular massed military units originated in earlier times—likely employing more static shoving and stabbing matches. Over the centuries the Greeks perfected their own form. One of the changes, according to Herodotus, included charging the enemy at a run. He stated that the Athenians (and by consequence, the Greeks) were the first to use such a strategy.[47] Despite how crazy the Greeks appeared to the Persians, it became increasingly clear that the speed of the hoplite run, replete with long, pointed spears, would scare the horses and thwart the possibility of a cavalry charge. A stampede of thousands of horses whose riders launched weapons in different directions was effective in breaking an enemy line only if it was *not* up against a charging, tightly-packed unit of warriors and a spiked wall of spears. Hence a cavalry retreat

became necessary. Without that crucial strategic step that their army relied upon for a chance at victory, they lost the battle. Their defeat not only established a passionate sense of Hellenic cultural identity among the Greeks, it also solidified—what they considered—the superiority of hoplite phalanx warfare.

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1 Michael M. Sage, *Warfare in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook,* (London: Routledge, 1996), 90.

2 Sarah B. Pomeroy, et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History,* 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 217.

3 Eretria was a city-state in the Ionian region. The Ionians, in turn, were Athenian allies.

4 Aeschylus, *The Persians* 93–99, The Perseus Catalog, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/

5 The Medes were an ancient Iranian people who spoke the Median language and who inhabited an area known as Media between modern-day western and northern Iran; the birth and death years of Datis I and Artaphernes are unknown.

6 Herodotus, *Histories* 6.105.1, The Perseus Catalog, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/; legend has it that Philippides covered about 140 miles in two days, and then ran back. He then ran roughly 26.2 miles to the battlefield at Marathon and back to Athens to announce Greek victory over Persia, after which he collapsed and died from exhaustion. Undoubtedly a myth, this story inspired a modern-day sporting event known as the marathon race.

7 Ibid., 6.112.1.

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9 Sage, *Warfare in Ancient Greece*, 90.

10 Ibid., 40, 47.

11 Owen Rees, *Great Battles of the Classical Greek World* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2016), 193_194.

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16 Rees, *Great Battles of the Classical Greek World,* 195.

17 Ibid., 196.

18 Ibid., 194.

19 Herodotus *Histories*, 6.102.1.

20 Ibid., 6.112.2.

21 Billows, *Marathon*, 135.

22 Rees, *Great Battles of the Classical Greek World,* 195.

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24 Pomeroy, et al., *Ancient Greece,* 217.

25 Herodotus, *Histories* 6.109.6; a polemarch was a senior military title in various Greek city states. The name derives from the words polemos (war) and archon (ruler, leader).

26 Ibid., 6.112.2.

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30 Herodotus, *Histories,* 6.110.1.

31 Ibid., 6.111.3.

32 Ibid., 6.113.1.

33 Peter Krentz, *The Battle of Marathon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 159.

34 Herodotus, *Histories* 6.112.1.

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42 Herodotus, *Histories,* 6.113.3.

43 Ibid., 6.117.1.

44 Harry C. Avery, "Herodotus 6.112.2," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 103 (1972): 21.

45 Ibid., 22.

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